

"THE LION'S SHARE"

In reading the narratives of the first two books of the Torah, it is good for us to keep in mind the guide-lines and the caution expressed by the Zohar:

ווי לאינון חייביא דאמרי דאורייתא לאו איהו אלא  
ספורה בעלמא, דאינון מסחכלין בלבושא ולא יתיר (זהר במדבר קנ"ב)

"Woe to those sinners who say that the Torah is nothing but a collection of simple stories, for they see but the garment, the superficial aspects of Torah, but not more than that." This same counsel, to look beyond the literal for the deeper meaning, is true of the commentaries and narratives of the Rabbis. They are to be understood as profound teachings in metaphoric dress, not as fairy tales or as the frivolous products of an extravagant imagination.

In this spirit let us recall an incident related by the Rabbis concerning Noah's ark and his adventures on it during that first great cataclysm of the flood. The Midrash comments on the verse

וישאר אך נח

"And only Noah was left." The word akh is always understood to be restrictive, it limits the subject under discussion. Why, then, was this word necessary in this verse? Surely, the entire context of the story, as well as the verse itself, tells us that all humanity was destroyed except for Noah. In their answer, the Rabbis of the Midrash imply that the word akh comes to tell us that there was something lacking in Noah himself. This imperfection of Noah resulted from a rather unfortunate encounter he had with one of his passengers aboard the ark. One time, the Rabbis tell us, Noah was late in feeding the lion, as a result of which the lion bit him, and he emerged from this confrontation with the lion limping. Thus, Noah remained akh, with a serious impairment or deficiency. One commentator on the Midrash maintained that we know that it was a lion that bit him because the word

וישאר אך , "a lion bit him."

by rearrangement yields אכשו ארי

Now, what do they mean by this? Why tell us this story? What is behind the "garment" of this tale?

The lion, of course, was right. Noah may have felt justified in postponing the lion's meal, because after all, he saved the lion, and through him the entire species, from extinction. However, as the master of his ship, it was Noah's duty to discharge his responsibilities to others before feeding himself. Indeed, Judaism recognizes this as an eternal ethical idea, enshrined today in the Halakhah: it is forbidden to sit down to a meal until you have first fed all domestic animals which rely upon you. For this is the order which we read in the second paragraph of the Shema: first, וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בְּשָׂדֶךָ לְבִהֵמָתְךָ -- "And I shall give grass in your field for your animals" -- and only after that, וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ -- "you shall eat and be satisfied." Noah's failure to feed the lion and give him his lion's share was therefore a moral failing, an imperfection in his ethical shelemut.

And yet, one can find more cogent and convincing complaints against Noah if one looks for them. What the Rabbis had in mind, I believe, was not to document the case against Noah's supposed righteousness. Rather, they intended to give us a <sup>wise but</sup> sad commentary on human nature, and to remind us to try to avoid the pitfalls thereof. That feature is the perverse quality of overlooking what is most obvious, of not seeing what stares you in the face. Imagine: of all the varied beasts, animals and birds aboard that <sup>at</sup> flooding menagerie, whom does Noah overlook?--the lion, king of the beasts, the strongest and mightiest of all; the one which, according to a medieval version of this story, complained that it was by nature a carnivorous, and had been fed only straw, and hence was famished. Noah ignored none less than the lion -- the most important passenger on the second deck of that famous boat, and potentially the most dangerous. What an oversight!

But -- are we much better? it is obvious, for instance, that the duty

of the governor of a state is to utilize his broad administrative experience in order to guide the political life of his domain in a manner that will redound to the better welfare of the majority of its citizens. Yet this very day, if we are to believe the political analysts and prognosticators, a majority of the citizens of one of the greatest states of the Union, on the Pacific coast, is prepared to elect as governor a man who has absolutely no political experience and whose only virtue is that he is a handsome masculine figure whom they recognize from the Late Late Show! Apparently, what is obvious is being overlooked.

Or take Bar Mitzvah celebrations. Obviously, the entire purpose of this event is to induct a young Jew into the life of Jewish adulthood. Yet, to judge by the contemporary standards of Bar Mitzvah celebrations, it has become nothing more than an exercise in competitive lavishness and exhibitionistic extravagance, while the religious dimension of the celebration is totally ignored.

Obviously, to cite another example, the main function of marriage for a young woman is to give love and provide happiness for her husband. Yet how often it happens that a young girl marries, throws herself into the excitement of her new status with all the thrills of shopping and furnishing and entertaining-- and forgets that one most obvious item: her husband. Or, a young man immerses himself into his career, marries a wife and sires children, and is so absorbed in making a living that he forgets to live. He tells himself that he is working hard in order to provide for his family; but 10 or 20 or 30 years later, after he has made his small fortune, he discovers that all he has, indeed, is -- money. But he learns that all the money in the world cannot undo what he has done: he has succeeded in making his wife miserable and in alienating the affection of his children.

Indeed, institutions are no better. Quite obviously, the purpose of the Synagogue is to provide for prayer and Torah. Yet so many synagogues and temples across the breadth and length of this land are so involved in "activities," that their most "active" people are rarely, if ever, seen in the Synagogue for services.

One recalls the story of the renowned Hasidic teacher, the Berditchever Rebbe, who sent a messenger calling the entire town to an emergency meeting in the market place. The entire population responded immediately to the Rabbi and his crisis-call: businessmen, housewives, laborers, children from school, and the greybeards from the study hall, all streamed to the market place where a platform was set up. The great Rebbe ascended the platform and addressed the hushed audience. He said to them only one sentence: <sup>דער וועלט</sup> / עס איז דא א גאט אין -- "There is a G-d in the world!"

How necessary it is to remind ourselves of the obvious! The same is true of the professions. Obviously, and by terms of his Hypocratic oath, the goal of a physician is the total welfare of his patients. Yet how often doctors today fall into professionalism, losing the human touch, and losing as well fundamental human compassion and sympathy. There are communities where it is dangerous, even fatal, to become sick on weekends.

And Rabbis are no better. Quite obviously, the purpose of the Rabbinate is to advance the exposition and interpretation of Torah, and the business of a Rabbi is primarily to study Torah. Yet all too often, too many of my colleagues are so overwhelmed by the secondary and even trivial considerations which crowd the calendar of a Rabbi that the one thing we most easily and usually overlook is just what is most obvious: the study of Torah.

This week, at the annual meeting of the American Council of Education, one distinguished critic commented precisely about this problem in scholarship as well: the divorce of scholarship and education! Whoever has gone through an American university know how rare a good teacher is. College professors have come to believe that the teaching aspect of their professions is merely the excuse for which they receive a check; their main interests are far far away from the welfare of their students. Thus, students disown scholars, and scholars disown students -- who should benefit from the lion's share of their teachers' labors! It is, as the speaker commented, "the vision of madness accomplished."

Apparently then, Noah's failing is a universal one. To identify what is most obvious is, obviously, not the most obvious talent. To see the simple is not the simplest of tasks. One of the great Musar teachers said the following about the verse in Solomon's proverbs: החכם עיניו בראשו "The wise man has his eyes in his head." But is not that self-evident? Do we need Solomon to teach us such a simple lesson in anatomy? The answer, he said, is that Solomon teaches us that the wise man's head dictates where his eyes should look, whereas the fool's eyes tells his head what to think! To know what is really important, to know where to look and what to see, requires great intelligence and delicate sensitivity and unusual wisdom. To avoid the oversight of what is significant, you need a significant insight.

The story of Noah, as recounted by the Rabbis, ought to give us pause to examine more critically our own individual situations. It urges us not to miss the forest because of the trees, the lions because of the rabbits, the whole because of the parts. It ought to remind us of the larger questions of life, which are obviously more important to people of intelligence, as well as the details of making a living; of the "why" as well as the "how" of life; what I ought to do as well as what I can.

It ought, in brief, give us the wisdom not to deprecate what is most important, and not to lionize what is trivial.

Without this, we can never hope to attain the shelemut, that perfection, which Noah lacked, but which all of us, his descendants, must strive for with all our hearts and all our souls.